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In Memoriam of Dr. Rosemary Yancik☆

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“The little lady who started the big war” –Abraham Lincoln described Harriet Beecher Stowe, hinting on the idea that as the author of Uncle Tom Cabin she created the idealistic foundation for the Civil War and the liberation of slaves. This is how we want to remember Rosemary Yancik, PhD while reflecting on her recent death. Rosemary was petite, but very conspicuous in spirit; she singlehandedly laid the foundation of Geriatric Oncology, a movement that now involves thousands of practitioners and has connected oncologists and geriatricians around the world. Friends for decades, we always cherished her welcoming smile, her enthusiasm, and her passion for foreign languages, as well as her openness to explore different cultures. In 1993 in Perugia Italy, after a conference on Breast Cancer in older women, she could hardly wait for visiting the Rocca Paolina, a renaissance fortress in Perugia glooming under the stars. In 1996 in Tampa, after the conference on cancer and aging, she allured the whole gathering of serious scientists into a wild dance on the boat crossing the Tampa Bay. She was a family woman who went to graduate school after her daughters had grown, who referred to her daughters as her best friends, a wife proud of her home and of her cuisine. Mostly she was a person of vision, one of those people who can see a light in the horizon when everybody else see a mist of dancing shadows. Her vision was multidimensional. She was among the first to realize that the epidemics pattern of cancer in the older adults in North America and Western Europe followed parallel lines, that cancer and aging was a worldwide problem and that the management of cancer in older adults needed to be multidisciplinary. During the combined National Cancer Institute–European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) conference in Venice she confessed that she was a sociologist surrounded by clinicians, and asserted the importance of the cooperation of medicine and sociological disciplines. Beyond vision, she had a profound sense of mission, the idea that those who have a talent should use it for the good of others.

Since the beginning of her work at the National Cancer Institute in the Division of Cancer Control, she recognized that cancer in the older person would soon become the most common form of cancer, and that without the inclusion of older patients in clinical trials, talking of “cancer control” was nonsense. Fighting against cultural and administrative barriers she convinced different research institutions to work together on the theme “cancer in the elderly”, and in 1980 she organized the first combined symposium of the National Cancer Institute and the National Institute of Aging focused on geriatric cancer. The book originated from that meeting may well be considered the cornerstone of Geriatric Oncology. She first recognized the importance of considering the older person beyond the cancer, and in particular how the presence of comorbidity could affect prognosis and treatment choices.

Rosemary knew everybody in the world of aging research and cancer epidemiology, and she was generously helping everybody by participating in meetings, supporting conferences and reviewing research protocols. For example, she played a major role in laying the theoretical foundation of the International Society of Geriatric Oncology (SIOG), in Buenos Aires, Genova, Tampa, Rome and she was present at the foundation of SIOG that took place at the Russian Tea Room in New York City in 2000. In 2004, she was honored with the second Paul Calabresi Award during the annual SIOG conference in San Francisco. She was the most enthusiastic lobbyist for the geriatric oncology movement. During the first uncertain years of the movement, she made sure that enough funding was available for the movement to survive and flourish.

Rosemary is dead but her enthusiasm, her inspiration, and her spirit survive in the people that had the fortune to be her friends. Her vision lives in the many young geriatricians and oncologists that fight together every day to relieve the burden of sufferance of older patients with cancer.

☆ This memorial was prepared by three friends and mentees of Dr. Rosemary Yancik.